

## Aesthetics and politics in North Korean socialist realist painting: On approved ways of seeing

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This paper inquires into aesthetics and politics in North Korean socialist realist painting by way of an examination of North Korean journalist Han Chol Ju's article series "Visit to Korean Art Gallery" and three paintings in *Korea Today* (2010–2011). The paper explains late North Korean leader Kim Jong Il's national-Stalinist conception of *Juche* socialist realism in *On Fine Art* (1991); considers one Korean painting (*Chosŏnhwa*), two oil paintings (*yuhwa*), and one jewel painting (*posŏkhwa*); and addresses approved ways of seeing in political-aesthetic experience and response in the North Korean situation.

**Keywords:** aesthetics; art criticism; *Juche* ideology; national-Stalinism; North Korean socialist realism; painting

### Introduction

North Korean visual art has been raising its international profile over the past decade, with exhibitions in Austria, Australia, Canada, Italy, the Netherlands, Russia, and the United States. While North Korea remains globally stigmatised for its authoritarian national-Stalinist system, curiosity in the national visual arts culture has developed among a number of academics, art collectors, and non-specialists.<sup>1</sup> The country, which is economically impoverished, has been receptive to moods in the West, showcasing its state-commissioned art as part of a general strategy to generate foreign income, other methods including trade in consumer goods, information technology, minerals, tourism services, and weapons.

North Korean art, however, remains a subject of which little is known in English, and the majority of Western academics who have discussed it are not aestheticians, art critics, or art practitioners.<sup>2</sup> Case in point is the 3–4 September 2010 symposium at the MAK in Vienna, Austria, where the speakers were Koen De Ceuster (history), Aidan Foster-Carter (sociology), Rüdiger Frank (economics), Marsha Haufler (art history), Sonja Häussler (philology), Kate Hext (literature), James E. Hoare (history), Frank Hoffmann (art history), Keith Howard (musicology), Ross King (linguistics and political science), Brian R. Myers (literature), Jane Portal (archaeology), and Dafna Zur (literature).<sup>3</sup>

Although most of these commentators are not formally aesthetics or art specialists, it is still important that an attempt is being made to engage visual art in the North Korean case. Perhaps in response to foreign interest and to promote

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awareness for the global art market, the international North Korean magazine *Korea Today* published an article series titled “Visit to Korean Art Gallery” by staff reporter Han Chol Ju, with photos by Kim Jong Su, in its December 2010 and January and March 2011 issues.<sup>4</sup> Han’s piece serves as a useful entryway for addressing North Korean art and some general but significant problems of aesthetics and politics in North Korean socialist realist painting: Korean painting (*Chosŏnhwa*), oil painting (*yuhwa*), and jewel painting (*posŏkhwa*).

Officially, in North Korea, aesthetics and politics are not autonomous spheres of social human activity. Party-state politics procures and invests in aesthetic values, objects, and conventions in an effort to manage national life so that it is favourable to the governing interests of the ruling Workers’ Party of Korea and Korean People’s Army. With politics allegorically encoded into a nationalist regime of art, the aim is to structure and construct popular perception of life, reality. But as Han’s observations on North Korean socialist realist painting show, the intended political message of the art object does not directly reveal itself unless people’s aesthetic perceptions are normatively educated.

### Socialist realism, “Our Style of Socialist Realism”

“Visit to Korean Art Gallery” is a report of a guided tour of the Korean Art Gallery (*Chosŏn misul pangmulgwan*), founded in 1948, in Pyongyang after recent refurbishment. While the writing is formulaic, what is notable is that Han does not do a number of things one might expect with officially approved statements on North Korean visual art: accolades to the now-deceased leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, glorification of *Juche* ideology (i.e., subject ideology; populistically axiomatized in 1972 as “man is the master of everything and decides everything”), and reference to the party and socialist realism (Kim 1972c, 12).<sup>5</sup> Rather, the piece begins by saying the gallery celebrates Korean creativity, history, and traditions and helps members of the “public enjoy themselves” (Han 2010).

Notably, the word “beautiful” appears five times in the article; yet visitors to the gallery are not supposed to be there to enjoy a pure aesthetic (sensory-emotional cognitive) experience (see David-West 2013). Art is didactic in North Korea, or as Han points out when speaking about the genre of Korean painting, pictorial depiction delivers the “essential message” of an object that contains a “noble idea” (Han 2010). Reading the article series, one finds several nationalist allegorical themes that stand out—the anti-Japanese guerrilla resistance in the colonial era, the Korean People’s Army and anti-US struggle in the Korean War, army-people unity, the heroic Korean people and nationally self-contained socialist construction, the *Songun* (military-first) era, and the happy life (see David-West 2006; Holz 1993; Kamenski 1993).

After the dropping of “Marxism-Leninism” and “Communism” from the 1992 and 2009 revised North Korean constitutions, neither of those terms appear in “Visit to Korean Art Gallery”, unprofitable and unjustifiable as the words are in the post-Soviet epoch without Soviet economic aid. Despite the formal distance from the former USSR, North Korea is still a state that was constructed and founded under the Soviet Army in 1945 to 1948, during the height of Zhdanovism (Stalinist cultural nationalism in the arts).<sup>6</sup> Not surprisingly, national-Stalinisms appear in Han’s

article, such as “revolutionary and popular pictorial art congenial to the sentiments and feelings of the Korean people” (Han 2011a).

The notion of a state-controlled “revolutionary and popular” art conforming to state-approved national “sentiments and feelings” is from the Soviet Stalinist 1930s and 1940s. The idea was embraced by Kim Il Sung and is also found in the 1991 North Korean work *On Fine Art (Misullon; Art Treatise)*, which is credited to the late Kim Jong Il. Repeating Josef Stalin’s well-known policy dictums in their Korean reincarnation, Kim Jong Il says, “Juche fine art is a revolutionary and popular art which is national in form and socialist in content” (Kim n.d., *On fine art*, 1). He adds, “The socialist realism of our era is essentially the Juche creative method, Juche realism” (Kim n.d., *On fine art*, 35). The bureaucratic-administrative “creative method” is elaborated as follows in the East Asian circular writing style:

The fundamental principle of Juche realism is to be *national in form and socialist in content*. Here, socialist content is smashing the old, creating the new, and waging a struggle to achieve the independence of the masses who have become the masters of their own destiny; national form is what is liked by the people of a given country and suits their sentiments and tastes. The important principle advanced by Juche realism as a creative method can be successfully carried out only by the unity of socialist content and national form.

Being national in form and socialist in content is indispensable for embodying the *Party spirit, working-class spirit and popular spirit* of art. Socialist content is Party, working-class and popular content, and national form is an artistic form liked by the people. Therefore, creating *works of fine art which are national in form and socialist in content fully embodies Party spirit, working-class spirit and popular spirit*. The essential characteristics of Juche realism as a creative method lie precisely in the fact that it makes it possible to embody Party spirit, working-class spirit and popular spirit by truthfully depicting life and incorporating national form and socialist content, and to create works with high ideological and artistic qualities, works that meet the requirements of the period and the aspirations of the people. (Kim n.d., *On fine art*, 35–36; emphasis added)

Notwithstanding the originality North Korean sources attribute to such statements, Kim is modelling Stalin and his cultural czar Andrei Zhdanov. Specifically, the triad of “Party spirit, working-class spirit and popular spirit” (i.e., *partiinnost’*, *klassovost’*, and *narodnost’* in Russian), along with “truthfully depicting life” as the totalitarian populist-Bonapartist party sees it, goes back to Zhdanov’s canonization of socialist realism in 1934.<sup>7</sup> As a national-Stalinist, Kim states, “Artists *should effectively contribute to the education* of the working people and young people in the *Korean-nation-first spirit* by producing a greater number of good works of art depicting the nature of our country in a meaningful and emotional way” (Kim, n.d., *On fine art*, 67; emphasis added).

Kim’s orthodox Zhdanovist principle of the artist as a party- and people-oriented educator underlies the earlier-mentioned reference in Han’s “Visit to Korean Art Gallery” to the “noble idea” that North Korean paintings are said to embody. Indeed, in Kim’s *On Fine Art*, invocation of the “noble” is so frequent that it is burdensome to cite each instance—for example, noble spiritual requirement, noble spiritual demand, noble struggle for a happier future, noble aesthetic ideal, noble ideological and moral qualities, noble beings, noble image of the leader, noble virtues, noble cultural and emotional life, noble art of mankind, and so on. Unlike

the Soviet-Stalinist case, the “noble” is a Neo-Confucian element in North Korean *Juche* socialist realism.

As a rule, anything the party approves of is noble. Continuing the pre-modern Neo-Confucian tradition of art as a servant of morality, Kim advocates artworks that are conservative, figurative, non-analytic, and without freedom of self-determination. This perspective is demonstrated in his Soviet Stalinist-influenced attitude to abstract art: “The cities in capitalist societies are now being decorated mostly with abstract sculptures. Such decorative sculptures show the obviously anti-popular character and corrupt aspect of modern imperialism under which mental and cultural life is deteriorating, and mirror its decadent social climate” (Kim, n.d., *On fine art*, 127). That is to say, abstract art is anti-people, capitalist, corrupt, imperialist, insane, and decadent art.

Kim Jong Il’s position on abstract art is not exclusively Neo-Confucian and Soviet Stalinist, however. Rather, his cultural policy statement is a hybrid inheritance of the Neo-Confucian tradition of moral art, the colonial-era Korean preference for Japanese-Western academic realism, the Stalinist-Zhdanovist hostility to abstractionism, and Kim Il Sung’s 1951 dictum “abstraction means death in art” (Kim 1972d, 9). Basically, the problem abstraction poses for the utilitarian and moral theory of art in North Korea is that abstract images have an indirect or attenuated resemblance to objects in three-dimensional space and, thus, do not readily serve the purpose of visually communicating party-state policies through nationalist allegory.<sup>8</sup>

Wherever there is art, there are conventions of seeing, interpreting, and understanding art, and visual art conventions certainly obtain in North Korea. But there is a complication. Aesthetically, in the act of perceiving art objects, the artistic experience is not a direct or linear process. Even North Korean viewers do not always know what a work of art is *supposed* to represent and what they are *supposed* to see in the artwork. This complication in perception, also a complication in visual semiotics and visual vocabulary, is indicated by the fact that a guide in “Visit to Korean Art Gallery” is reported as explaining *intended meaning* to Han and other gallery visitors (Figure 1).

### Korean painting, “Our Style of Painting”

The first part of Han’s article series observes that the genre of Korean painting is a “dominant painting genre of the nation” (Han 2010). Nothing is said about the brushes, inks, or paper used, nor much on history, only that a “modern style of the traditional technique of Korean painting” is used and that “diversified themes” are displayed at the Korean Art Gallery (Han 2010). While this is not particularly helpful, Han indicates that the genre has been active from 1966 to the present, and some major themes are the “Fatherland Liberation War” (1950–1953), “postwar rehabilitation and construction” (1953–1960), “socialist construction” (1961–present), and nature in the “Songun era” (1998–present). *Juche* ideology and *Songun* ideology have been synonymous in North Korea since 2005.<sup>9</sup>

As with Han, Kim Jong Il’s *On Fine Art* is also short on factual and historical details of Korean painting. “Today our country is giving definite precedence to Korean painting”, declares the late North Korean leader (Kim n.d., *On fine art*, 29). “The art of Korean painting is an excellent one which our people have mastered to



Figure 1. North Korean visitors viewing traditional Korean paintings at the Korean Art Gallery in Pyongyang. Source: *Korea Today*, No. 654, December 2010.

meet their aesthetic aspirations and requirements in the course of creating and developing their national culture” (Kim [n.d.](#), *On fine art*, 80). Therefore, “primary importance” must be attached to it (Kim [n.d.](#), *On fine art*, 90). Even though Korean painting receives the bulk of attention of all painting genres in *On Fine Art*, Kim does not go beyond generic advice and nationalist value claims. There are, however, two statements that tend to stand out.

Firstly, Kim says Korean painting is a traditional East Asian genre that shares mediums and techniques with other variants in China, Japan, and neighbouring countries. He notes that the long history of the artform on the Korean peninsula is traceable to tomb murals from the Koguryō dynasty (277 BCE–668 CE) and that the genre continues to be developed in North Korea. Kim claims Korean painting mirrors Korean resourcefulness and emotions from the feudal to colonial eras, buoys “national feelings and aesthetic tastes”, and offers a lifelike representation of reality (Kim [n.d.](#), *On fine art*, 88–89). The brushwork is bright, simple, and delicate, characteristics that make the genre powerful, noble, and beautiful (Kim [n.d.](#), *On fine art*, 89).

Secondly, Kim states that brushwork, colour, perspective, texture, and tonal value in Korean painting are based on the principles of “condensation and concentration”. He refers to the “one-stroke technique” and “linear perspective method” as traditional techniques that embody the principles of representation in the genre. Afterwards, it is mentioned that surface, focal point, visual space, and harmony of forms are also based on “condensation and concentration” (*Korea Today* [n.d.](#), *On*



*fine art*, 89). What Kim means by this phrase is elaborated in general as “providing clear visual expressions of the essence of things and phenomena, and getting people to think deeply and feel many things through concise depiction” (Kim, n.d., *On fine art*, 14–15).

In North Korea, Korean painting consists of genre painting, landscape painting, and paintings of flowers and birds (*Korea Today* 2009). Traditionally, works were often monochromatic, rendered in black ink on white rice paper and illustrated scenes of nature, including waterfalls, trees, mountains, flowers, and animals. Seen as unsuited under North Korean socialist realism before the Korean War (1950–1953), the traditional genre fell out of favour. By 1955, however, it was rehabilitated and celebrated as an indigenous technique, with political support from Kim Il Sung in 1966 (Portal 2005, 150–151; Szalontai 2005, 67, 79). Kim (1972a, 142), who regarded monochromatism as a defect, instructed ink painters to use colour in order “to suit our contemporary sensibility”.

According to the Korean Art Gallery guide in Han’s article, Chŏng Yŏng-man’s *Evening Glow of Kangsŏn* is a “typical example” of a new thematic order of Korean painting referred to as “socialist construction in the landscape mode” (Han 2010). Details of the ink painting are not provided, but this is the well-known, award-winning 1973 work *Kangsŏn-ŭi chŏnyŏk noŭl* (Figure 2). Socialist construction, as understood in Soviet Stalinism and North Korean national-Stalinism—not Marxism—is the statification of the means of production (e.g., communication, industry, transport) within a nationally self-contained, bureaucratically planned economy focused on heavy industry and based on the conservative programme of “socialism in one country”.<sup>10</sup> Correspondingly, landscapes of socialist construction are industryscapes. Han recounts the Korean Art Gallery guide’s description of *Evening Glow of Kangsŏn* in language that is aesthetic, in the appreciative sense, and nationalist allegorical:



Figure 2. Chŏng Yŏng-man, *Evening Glow of Kangsŏn*, 1973. Korean painting. Source: *Korea Today*, No. 654, December 2010.

Against the background of the fierce evening glow the then Kangson Steel Works stands imposing and magnificent. (The works has now developed as Chollima Steel Complex.) Illuminated by the glowing rays of the twilight that dyes the sky red, the high and low buildings of the works and the sky-scraping chimneys look quite majestic; the red beams and steam from the melting shops and the blue-tinged light from the works' windows look impressively meaningful. All those sights show the Korean people's revolutionary spirit of being creative, innovative, and miracle-working. (Han 2010)

Viewers who are outside of or removed from the meta-authorial (party-state) pictorial reading conventions of Chŏng's *Evening Glow of Kangsŏn* will see things in the painting that are not officially intended, but which nonetheless manifest phenomenologically as the visual composition interacts with the faculties of emotion, perception, memory, and recognition. The painting opens itself to competing visual readings. For example, the work can appear as a representation of industrial pollution, with dirty poisonous smoke rising from archaic steel machinery, a menacing fire-orange firmament, and ominous reflections on the dark water, all threatening environmental breakdown and catastrophe.

Suddenly, *Evening Glow of Kangsŏn* ceases to be a glorification of the "Korean people's revolutionary spirit of being creative, innovative, and miracle-working". Instead, the painting reconstructs a world of top-down bureaucratic state planning, inefficient national industries, and negative environmental impact. Even if this interpretation might point to real-life social, political, and economic conditions in North Korea, it would, as far as Kim Jong Il's Stalinist-Zhdanovist criteria are concerned, be regarded as an anti-party, anti-working class, and anti-popular view reflective of "reactionary idealistic aesthetics" (Kim, n.d., *On fine art*, 6). Kim says, "Loyalty to the Party is an essential characteristic of socialist [realist] fine art" (Kim, n.d., *On fine art*, 19).

Chŏng Yŏng-man, who died in 1999, was the chair of the Central Committee of the Korean Artists Union, a Kim Il Sung Prize winner, a People's Artist (*immin yesulgain*), twice a Labour Hero, and a "grand master of Korean painting". His *Evening Glow of Kangsŏn* is said to have broken new ground in Korean painting (Chosŏn t'ongshin 1999; Korean News 1999a, 1999b).<sup>11</sup> The piece, in other words, is a testament to Chŏng's political loyalty and his role as a faithful party painter. The complications of aesthetic perception, resemblance, and representation in art, however, preclude that Chŏng's work will disclose the same information in every case (see Marshall 1989; Goodman 1976, 259–260). North Koreans must thus be constantly trained in the politically correct conventions of the national visual art.

### Oil painting, "Our Style of Oil Painting"

The second part of Han's series deals with oil paintings at the Korean Art Gallery, beginning with a brief nationalist art history: The genre began in Korea in the 1920s, but development was retarded as a result of the "Japanese imperialists' policy of obliterating the nation's culture", and it was only after "national liberation in August 1945" that "revolutionary and popular" oil painting arose (Han 2011a). This account neglects the fact that Korean oils began in the 1910s with Ko Hŭi-dong (1886–1965), who, like other Koreans, studied Western painting in Imperial Japan and introduced the genre in colonial Korea. Korean painters, including nationalists,

also held an annual art exhibition from 1921 to 1936, which was outlived by the Japanese-dominated Chosŏn Art Exhibition of 1922 to 1944 (Portal 2005, 34–36).

During the colonial era of 1910 to 1945, Korean painters were introduced to academic realism, Cubism, Expressionism, Fauvism, Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and proletarian art (Kim 2005, 24, 30). Nevertheless, conservative Neo-Confucian sensibilities and standards in colonial Korea were not always receptive and also rejected nudes as scandalous and shameful (Kim 2005, 26; Portal 2005, 34–35). In addition, Cubism was not widely accepted, and no abstract art movement emerged in the country (Kim 2005, 31, 32). Following the joint United States and Soviet Army liberation, occupation, and division of Korea in 1945, Korean and Soviet Stalinist preference for old-fashioned academic realism, combined with Soviet training of artists in 1945 to 1950, ensured that nineteenth-century styles would dominate oil painting in North Korea.

While North Korean oils unite Soviet, Japanese-Western, and Korean traditions, North Korean Zhdanovism waged a political struggle against the manifestation of the modern art tendencies of “subjectivism, formalism, and naturalism” and the “art-for-art’s-sake doctrine”. In 1966, for example, Kim Il Sung called abstract art bourgeois, degenerate, and puzzling, reminding artists to prevent it from “penetrating” national art (Kim 1972a, 141). Meanwhile, he admonished painters against “rejecting positive artistic forms from other countries” (Kim 1972a, 141). Oil painting is excellent, he said, but it has to “harmonize with Korean sensibility”, which he suggests values *Juche* (defined by Kim as the “Korean revolution” in 1955 and the “independent stand” and “spirit of self-reliance” in 1965) and indigenous forms (Kim 1972a, 141).<sup>12</sup>

Concerning themes at the Ninth National Art Exhibition in 1966, Kim remarked on a few works on the Korean War and feudal exploitation of the peasantry. He highlighted optimism, unconditional party loyalty, conviction in the victory of the revolution, unity between army and people, hatred for the enemy, heroic fighting spirit, revenge, hatred for exploiting classes, class education, happiness under (state) socialism, revolutionary traditions of the anti-Japanese armed struggle, pride in (state) socialist construction, and the struggle against US imperialism (Kim 1972a, 138–140). Kim Jong Il’s *On Fine Art*, which adds little to this, maintains that oils must be national, *Juche*-based, unite form and content, and use condensation and intensification (Kim n.d., *On fine art*, 97–98).

Although Han’s article does not mention *Juche* doctrine, the piece is written with the Kims’ *Juche* socialist realist categories. Han states, for instance, that *The Battle on Height 1211* is a work in an “epic style” that portrays the “heroic struggle” of the Korean People’s Army against “US imperialist aggressors in the Fatherland Liberation War” (Han 2011a). Apparently, this is in reference to the 1965 work *1211 koji chŏnt’u* by Chŏng Kwan-ch’ŏl, Ryu Hyŏn-suk, and Yang Chae-hyŏk. Likewise, other oil paintings represent the idea of steelworkers who support the country with increased production, mothers who wish for their sons to bravely defend the country, and the Korean people who support the country with “sincere, creative work” (Han 2011a).

Superficially less political are landscapes. One *Mt. Myohyang* depicts “beautiful” autumn scenery; yet the nationalist political content consists in that this is a “celebrated mountain of Korea from olden times” (Han 2011a). Another politicised landscape is *Mt. Ryongak in Autumn*. Again, details are not provided, but this is the



known 2000 oil painting *Ryongaksan-ŭi kaül* by Paek Hwa-söng (Figure 3). The represented mountain is a “recreation ground of the people in the Songun [military-first] era” (Han 2011a). Han’s guide notes there is “a tree firmly standing on a sturdy rock as if it were a witness of the mountain’s history”, with the restored hermitage in the background (Han 2011a; emphasis added). The anthropomorphism is significant.

North Korean ideology, which is Stalinist Neo-Confucian, retains the ancient anthropocentrism of Confucianism and its cosmology of a moral universe in which abstract “man” is the master, a view that contradicts humanism (see David-West 2009, 2011). “Our fine art puts the archetype of an independent man at the centre of its portrayal”, says Kim Jong Il (n.d., *On fine art*, 1). Visually, the tree in *Pöbun Hermitage on Mt. Ryongak* is thus readable as embodying the *Juche* socialist realist archetype of autarkic “man”. Here, man as tree commands in the foreground, with a strong muscular trunk and perseverant stance at the edge of a rock, overlooking the scene, monitoring the Buddhist temple site, with arm-like branches adorned with golden-yellow leaves.

Another oil is *A Shepherdess on Her Way Home* (details unavailable), and it is said to represent “sincere, creative work” (Figure 4).<sup>13</sup> Combing landscape with human and animal forms, this impressionistic pastoral resonates with nationalist allegorism. The artwork is an embodiment of “popular spirit”, the paternal political space of the fatherland (*choguk*) containing the maternal physical space of the motherland (*ömöni choguk*). As women in North Korea are deemed responsible “by nature” for raising children and educating them in political ideology, the shepherdess occupies the golden mean of the composition, tending after the gentle flock, as a



Figure 3. Paek Hwa-söng, *Mt. Ryongak in Autumn*, 2000. Oil painting. Source: *Korea Today*, No. 655, January 2011.



Figure 4. *A Shepherdess on Her Way Home*. Oil painting. Source: *Korea Today*, No. 655, January 2011.

Korean Youth League boy stands behind her, smiling, safe (Kim 1971a, 16, 17, 19, 30; 1971b, 52).

Symbolically and spatially, the maternal figure is accentuated through the marriage of warm and cool hues combined with the visual perspective of the broad vista of mountains and the lake in the background, which form an implied triangle with the subject at its inverted apex. The white of her scarf and blouse (*chogori*) highlights her presence; the warm earthy brown of her skirt (*ch'ima*) grounds her to the field; the prod she holds denotes her authority and direction; and the lamb she carries symbolises her protective embrace. The shepherdess is an iconic national mother, and she gazes intently on the children who need to be in place for the political future of the North Korean party-state.

### **Jewel Painting, “Developed in Our Country”**

The third part of Han’s series covers Korean jewel painting, the full name of the genre. Not much history is provided, only that the artform developed in 1987 and that its medium is derived from gemstones, such as rubies and sapphires, with the advantage of being fade resistant (Han 2011b). An earlier article from the August 2009 issue of *Korea Today* adds that research on jewel painting actually began in 1984. North Korean painters were searching for durable pigments, studying how Koguryŏ tomb murals were unfaded after two millennia, and finally took inspiration from workers using colour-stone powder to decorate a building. A “certificate of invention” was granted in May 1987 (Sim 2009).

According to a Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) website article from 3 September 2002, a North Korean artist named Shin Pong-hwa founded jewel painting in the 1980s. Reportedly, Shin is “widely known” in North Korea: He is a doctoral holder, a Merited Artist, the director of the Korean Jewel Painting Creative Group at the Mansudae Art Studio in Pyongyang, and a member of the Central Committee of the Korean Artists Union (Chosŏn t’ongshin 2002). Strangely, however, the 2002 article about Shin in Korean does not appear in the English edition of KCNA.<sup>14</sup> More surprisingly, the 171 pages of Kim Jong Il’s *On Fine Art* devote only two sentences to jewel painting and nothing on Shin:

Jewel painting, a new form developed in our country, is elegant and exquisite in its representation, so exciting a unique feeling among the people. We must develop jewel painting that reflects the high level of the artist’s qualifications for painting and of his artistic talents, to properly represent the rich and ennobling aesthetic feelings of our people. (Kim n.d., *On fine art*, 98)

Since political exhortation is not a substitute for concrete information, one must turn to sources other than Kim Jong Il for facts about jewel painting. An anonymous statement by North Korean artists published at the Pyongyang-Painters.com website explains that the genre originally applied fine stone powder to glass and stone sheets. Now, natural and artificial gems in powdered form, combined with other unspecified materials, are applied to a variety of surfaces, including canvas, concrete walls, and fabric, not to mention aluminium, plastic, and zinc sheets (Pyongyang-Painters.com n.d.b, Korea Gem Painting). Moreover, the innovation of flexible and rollable jewel paintings had its first international showcase in Vietnam in 2009 (Pyongyang-Painters.com n.d.a, Introduction to North Korean Paintings).

*Korea Today* says “working people’s entertainment” is considered in jewel painting (Sim 2009). In addition, animals, human figures, and landscapes are subjects of portrayal (Han 2011b). All the same, there remains a political and tendentious dimension. Paintings of Lake Samji and Mt. Paekdu, for instance, are officially “associated” with the postcolonial heroic legend of Kim Il Sung and his “anti-Japanese revolutionary fighters” (Han 2011b). As with all manifestations of the political legend, unstated are Kim’s guerrilla partisanship in the Chinese Communist Party from 1931 to 1941 in Manchuria, his defeat by the Japanese and retreat to the Soviet Union, and his absorption into the Soviet Army until 1945, details that complicate the heroic-epic nationalist allegory.<sup>15</sup>

The virtual space of North Korean painting—Korean painting, oil painting, and jewel painting—does not offer historical representations.<sup>16</sup> Rather, it offers ahistorical and antihistorical representations, with an *eternal* “spirit and idea” for an *eternal* ethnic-race (*minjok*) and its *eternal* national posterity (Kim, n.d., *On fine art*, 21, 60).<sup>17</sup> No matter if words like “revolutionary” and “socialist” are invoked, “portrayal of the leader constitutes the *essence* of the content” of North Korean art, and “loyalty to the Party finds concentrated expression in *unfailing* loyalty to the leader” (Kim n.d., *On fine art*, 19, 20, emphasis added). These words of Kim Jong Il are consistent with the national-Stalinist *Juche* ideology and its abstract-anthropocentric cosmos in which “man is the master of everything and decides everything” (Kim, n.d., *On fine art*, 35; see David-West 2009).

Officially, the essence of Korean jewel painting is Kim Il Sung, who reportedly coined the name of the genre. While a metaphorical-symbolic relation to Kim is mandated, this does not mean that North Koreans who view jewel paintings will always perceive the leader and the party in pictorial images. Other associations, feelings, and intuitions will be summoned in the act of seeing. The phenomenology is indicated in Han's response to *Dove Dance* (*Pidulgi ch'um*), a jewel painting, which he reports was created by Shin Pong-hwa in 1992 (Figure 5). This work was the "first to catch my eyes", remarks the journalist, adding, "It depicted a dancer in an elegant white dove-like dress dancing while moving diagonally with a broad smile on her face" (Han 2011b).

Although Han's description is formally unremarkable, what is notable is that the *Korea Today* writer reports no meta-authorial explanations and conventions from the Korean Art Gallery guide. Han instead appears to be describing a personal aesthetic experience with *Dove Dance*. What the North Korean saw in the painting, what the painting showed the North Korean, was not an abstract *partiinnost'*, *klassovost'*, or *narodnost'*, but something considerably simpler: an elegant dress and a



Figure 5. Shin Pong-hwa, *Dove Dance*, 1992. Jewel painting. Source: *Korea Today*, No. 657, March 2011.



broad smile. After that, the reporter moved on, finding politics in other paintings: the Korean desire for national reunification, the struggle of the anti-Japanese guerrillas, and so on (Han 2011b).

Of course, writing for an official state publication like *Korea Today* would require that Han internalise editorial and self-censoring norms. Considering that professional reality in relation to the encoded political significance of the dove dancer's dress and smile, one can say that Han's aesthetic response, even if apolitical, is within a politically acceptable range of tolerance.<sup>18</sup> The reason is that attraction to elegance in attire and smiling generally conforms to Kim Jong Il's injunction about representing the "rich and ennobling aesthetic feelings of our people" in jewel painting. And if "working people's entertainment" is factored into the genre, Han's description of the painting is appropriate.

*Dove Dance* portrays a "positive character" whose external grace reflects her "noble spiritual world". The white dress satisfies the idea that "[c]lothes make the man", that "[c]ostume has a close relationship with the ideological and mental state of man" (Kim n.d., *On fine art*, 147, 148). The colour signifies the dancer's purity of mind and body, which must be guarded against political infiltration and staining, and the outer-as-inner beauty of her delicate, sensuous smile and uplifted arms excite "ideological feelings and aesthetic sense" (Kim, n.d., *On fine art*, 105).<sup>19</sup> She ascends ebulliently, becoming the white dove beside her, faithful to the leader, party, and peace with the "Korean-nation-first spirit". This contrasts with the grey, flightless pigeon in the background.

## Conclusion

Art by itself does nothing, and the same goes for North Korean art. Only when perceptually apprehended can the art object be activated and can there be a response in sensory and emotional cognition, which the ruling party-army regime in North Korea manipulates in order to preserve its social-political existence. As Han Chol Ju's "Visit to Korean Art Gallery" and the three paintings in *Korea Today* illustrate, art and aesthetics subserve as regulative political techniques under the party-state authority. But art as politics and aesthetics as politics are not constituted as mere sloganeering. Allegory, anthropomorphism, entertainment, metaphor, and symbolism are used to touch human feelings, including pleasant and serene feelings, in the political-aesthetic experience.

The general problems of aesthetics and politics in North Korean socialist realist painting thus addressed tend to recall the words of the late Polish aesthetician Stefan Morawski that a "politically aesthetic doctrine" is "a phenomenon which has more to do with the police than with culture" (Morawski 1974, 253). Here, though, the point should be taken as an analogy, not a homology. North Korea is an authoritarian, conservative, and nationalist country as a consequence of Neo-Confucian cultural history (1392–1910), Imperial Japanese colonialism (1910–1945) and Japanese fascism (1931–1945), the Soviet Army-overseen "revolution" (1945–1950), American saturation bombing in the Korean War (1950–1953), and the national-Stalinist social structure.<sup>20</sup>

North Korean visual art is produced under a system of "bureaucratically maimed socialism" in one country, where the orthodox Zhdanovist art-follows-party view has predominated for over sixty years as a result of peculiar historical conditions.<sup>21</sup> This

situation has resulted in an immensely politicised, socio-functionalist, and utilitarian art, the fundamental prerequisite of which is ritual support for the regime, whatever the private thoughts of the individual. The makers of art objects in this special case are not artists in the modern- or postmodern-capitalist sense, but “craftsmen of culture” for whom collectivism, folklore, legend, morality, and myth are normative constants and imperatives in the creative process.<sup>22</sup>

Still, aesthetics is involved, and that is signified in the Korean word for art, *misul* (*mi*, beautiful; *sul*, technique/method), which encompasses applied art, fine art, and handicraft and their complications. Art, even politically procured socialist realist art in North Korea, is a pattern of sensory data that stimulates aesthetic experience, which “preserves our familiarity with the world but is at the same time imprinted with strangeness” (Morawski 1974, 310, 311).<sup>23</sup> While aesthetic response is linked to an “entrenched schema of familiar perceptions”, aesthetic experience is a tensional *concordia discors*; it is agreement-disagreement, harmony-disharmony (Morawski 1974, 312). Thus, North Koreans, like reporter Han Chol Ju and the visitors at the Korean Art Gallery in Pyongyang, are educated in the approved ways of seeing.

## Notes

1. National-Stalinism is a nation-state building strategy that combines ethnocentric nationalism and the Stalinist program of constructing “socialism in one country”. See Chen and Lee (2007) and David-West (2012).
2. See an overview of North Korean art history and art policy in Hoffmann (2011), Lee (1991), and Portal (2005). The chronologies of Hoffmann’s, Lee’s, and Portal’s works end at 1998, 1989, and 1999, respectively, and do not cover the military-first (*sŏngun*) era of 1998 to the present. See David-West (2011).
3. See the symposium program *Exploring North Korean Arts: International Symposium, Universität Wien, Vienna, MAK, September 3–4, 2010* (Vienna: MAK, 2010), Universität Wien, [http://wirtschaft.ostasien.univie.ac.at/fileadmin/user\\_upload/lehrstuhl\\_wirtschaft\\_ostasien/Konferenzen/KOREA\\_FolderSymposium\\_04.pdf](http://wirtschaft.ostasien.univie.ac.at/fileadmin/user_upload/lehrstuhl_wirtschaft_ostasien/Konferenzen/KOREA_FolderSymposium_04.pdf) (accessed April 19, 2013). Symposium papers are published in Frank (2011).
4. The Korean Art Gallery (*Chosŏn misul pangmulgwan*) and the Paekdusan Architectural Institute (*Paekdu-san kŏnch’uk yŏnguwŏn*) in Pyongyang collaborated with the MAK in Vienna in organizing the exhibition “Flowers for Kim Il Sung: Art and Architecture from the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea”, which was held from May 19 to September 5, 2010. See “Flowers for Kim Il Sung: Art and Architecture from the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea”, MAK, [http://archive-at.com/page/119270/2012-07-14/http://www.mak.at/e/jetzt/ausstellungen/blumen\\_kimIlSung\\_e.html](http://archive-at.com/page/119270/2012-07-14/http://www.mak.at/e/jetzt/ausstellungen/blumen_kimIlSung_e.html) (accessed April 19, 2013).
5. The axiom is translated in this official work as “man is the master of all things and decides everything”; however, far more common in North Korean sources is “man is the master of everything and decides everything”.
6. The adoption of Zhdanovism in North Korea is discussed in Lim (1988–1989).
7. See Zhdanov (2004). See also Zhdanov (1950). The term “populist-Bonapartism” is coined from relevant discussion in Plekhanov (2004, 644–647), Trotsky (1991, 233–238; 2005, 169).
8. The point on resemblance in abstract art is from Marshall (1989, 74). Marshall, 69, 73, observes that some, not all, works of art are either true or false and that representational works (including abstract art) are analogous to words and propositional sentences, referring to things in the world, despite the differences between artistic conventions and linguistic conventions.
9. An official Korean Central News Agency from 2005 reports, “For the Party Juche is Songun and Songun is Juche”. *Songun* ideology was added alongside *Juche* ideology in the 2009 revised North Korean constitution. Korean News (2005). See the original Korean article in Chosŏn t’ongshin (2005)



10. Marxism, which is more radical than Stalinism, bases itself on Karl Marx and Frederick Engels' international socialist program of "permanent revolution"; seeks the abolition of world capitalism and the nation-state through the democratic self-rule of the working class in the system of workers' councils; and aims for the establishment of a rationally planned, socially owned global economy that operates on the principle of human needs. What the Stalinist Soviet Union denounced as "Trotskyism" was intransigent political commitment to the classical Marxist view that socialism cannot be reconciled with nationalism and the nation-state. On "permanent revolution", see Day and Gaido (2009), Lenin (2005), Marx and Engels (2006), and Trotsky (2007).
11. Portal (2005, 151) says Chŏng became a Merited Artist (*konghun yesulgain*) in 1974.
12. Kim (1972b, 19) first defined *Juche* as the "Korean revolution" in his 1955 party speech. During the Sino-Soviet split, Kim (1968, 37) redefined *Juche* as the "independent stand" and "spirit of self-reliance" in his 14 April 1965, lecture at the Ali Archam Academy of Social Sciences in Indonesia.
13. Han (2011a) uses the title *A Stockbreeder on Her Way Home. A Shepherdess on Her Way Home* appears on a related webpage after clicking on the hyperlinked image. The original work is on display in a room at the Korean Art Gallery dedicated to "oil paintings created from the 1970s to the 1980s".
14. Two articles in English that make brief reference to Shin are Korean News (1998, 2012). The Korean-language editions are Chosŏn t'ongshin (1998, 2012).
15. See Suh (1988). See also Cheong (2000).
16. See David-West (2006, 81–82) and Kamenski (1933, 155, 157). The phrase "virtual space" is from Langer (1957).
17. The word "ethnic-race" is used instead of "nation". The former is the more accurate translation of the original Korean *minjok*, from the Japanese *minzoku*, a neologism in the 1880s that was ethnicised and racialised in the 1890s. Appropriated in Korean nationalist discourse in the early 1900s, *minjok* was regularly used in the ethnic-racial sense after Imperial Japan declared a protectorate over Korea in 1905. Before fusion of *min* and *jok*, the words respectively meant "people" and "tribe".
18. The aesthetic politics of North Korean jewel painting must be stressed in contrast to the claim in Portal (2005, 163), that jewel paintings "often depict non-political subjects such as cats, landscapes and flowers". These things are all meta-authorially politically intended in the visual art of North Korean *Juche* socialist realism. Of course, the intention of a work is not the same thing as the function of a work.
19. Whiteness in North Korean political aesthetics is associated with children, mind, purity, and snow. See Kim (n.d., *On Juche literature*, 224).
20. See Armstrong (2003, 2010), Cumings (2010), Kang (2006, 2007), Lankov (2002, 2005), Shin (2006), and Szalontai (2005).
21. The phrase "bureaucratically maimed socialism" is from Morawski's characterization of the Soviet Union in the 1970s. See Morawski (1974, 340n8). On bureaucratic "socialism in one country" in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and the postcolonial countries, see Trotsky (1991) and Wohlforth (2006).
22. These views, which are assimilated in North Korea, are from Maxim Gorky, who codified socialist realism with Andrei Zhdanov at the First Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934. See Gorky (2004).
23. See Holz (1993, 77, 79) on aesthetic manipulation of the viewer.

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